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Suicida and the Gang

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WITH THE CONTRAS: A Reporter in the Wilds of Nicaragua. By Christopher Dickey. Simon & Schuster. 327 pp. \$18.95.

How is it that a handful of barbarous soldiers, universally despised when they were routed from Nicaragua six and a half years ago, have since grown into a fighting force of more than 10,000 that threatens the Sandinista government? How is it that the President of the United States can call this cruel collection of criminals, mercenaries, terrified peasants, upper-class landowners and former Somoza National Guardsmen "the moral equivalent of the Founding Fathers" and not be laughed out of the White House? How can truth have been so stood on its head that many intelligent people in the U.S. government and the mainstream media now consider the *contras*, whose atrocities have been thoroughly documented, a "legitimate democratic alternative" to the "totalitarian" Sandinistas?

In this engrossing though uneven book, Christopher Dickey provides a lot of information to help answer those questions. A *Washington Post* reporter who covered Central America from 1980 to 1983, Dickey is a good gumshoe. His sordid story of the *contras*' rise emerges through interviews with a diverse cast of characters, including the murderous National Guard sergeant aptly called Suicida, onetime U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua Lawrence Pezzullo, Sandinista hero turned *contra* Edén (Commander Zero) Pastora, Central Intelligence Agency point man Dewey Clarridge and Sacred Heart sister Lisa Fitzgerald.

The book begins on the eve of the Sandinista triumph, in July 1979. Anastasio Somoza's National Guard has collapsed and its remnants, several hundred troops led by Suicida, are pinned at San Juan del Sur with their backs to the Pacific Ocean. Sandinista Commander Pastora is ready to finish them off, but when he rises for the final battle he finds they have fled. Rather than pursue the Guard, Pastora seeks glory

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and heads for Managua. There Ambassador Pezzullo has forced Somoza to strike a deal and flee the country. Chaos reigns at the airport as the dictator's wealthy supporters try to claw their way out. A mysterious North American named Bill, presumably a C.I.A. operative, flies in, somehow rounds up the cream of the National Guard and smuggles them to Miami. Meanwhile, Suicida and his troops have commandeered some fishing boats and are floating half-starved in the Gulf of Fonseca; four days later they land safely in El Salvador. So within a week of the revolution's triumph, the foundations of the counterrevolution are in place: the National Guard leadership in Miami; the grunts in El Salvador; the planning, money and technical assistance in Langley.

The experiences of the *contras* in 1980 and 1981 as they struggled to get organized varied according to their social class. In a Miami motel the elite Guard threw away food donated by the Jesus Foundation (they wanted their meals prepared as they had been in Managua), lounged around the pool and made calls to friends and relatives all over the world. Suicida and his less privileged followers drifted to Honduras and starved in makeshift camps as they waited for weapons. In Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, still other ex-Guardsmen assessed their skills in the job market and ended up hiring themselves out to the local masters of repression. Dickey documents how, for example, the fledgling *contras* plotted and carried out the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero in San Salvador in March 1980.

One of Dickey's strengths is that he sees the *contra* war as part of a regional political struggle. From the very beginning, he tells us, the *contras* were nurtured by the C.I.A.'s right-wing surrogates throughout Latin America: left-over agents of the 1954 coup in Guatemala, Miami-based veterans of the Bay of Pigs invasion, Honduran security forces under Col. Gustavo Alvarez Martinez, the military junta then in power in Argentina. By the end of 1981 the days of hunger were over for the *contras*. Ronald Reagan had approved a plan: the United States would provide

the money (first installment, \$19 million) and the organizing; the Argentine military, expert in the techniques of terrorism, would handle the training; and Honduras would donate the base of operations. The plan seemed to serve everyone's purposes. The Hondurans got an infusion of money and military equipment; the Argentines vainly hoped their contribution would earn them Washington's neutrality when they later seized the Malvinas; and the Reagan Administration found an ingenious way to destabilize the Nicaraguan government without losing much North American blood.

The publicly stated goals remained murky—something about building a democratic opposition and pressuring the Sandinistas to stop sending arms to Salvadoran guerrillas. But the *contras* themselves had only one goal: the overthrow of the Sandinistas, who had humiliated them and stripped them of their privileges. The last thing characters like Suicida, Krill, Cancer and El Muerto wanted was democracy. Suicida's reputation as a brute who had murdered one man and beaten others was well established. Krill had joined the Guard because through it his family got "better doctors and schools and houses." Among the first non-Guard recruits to join the *contras* were a band of eight cattle rustlers and an escaped prisoner. Throughout the war such men, masquerading as democrats, would routinely rape and murder innocent people and fight among themselves. By the end of 1983 Krill alone had taken the lives of more than thirty people (not counting those he killed in combat), most of them unarmed prisoners and civilians but some his own commandos. Dickey captures some of this violence, but he conspicuously omits the views of even one Nicaraguan victim of the unspeakably obscene *contra* atrocities. These are documented far better elsewhere (see Reed Brody's book *Contra Terror in Nicaragua* (South End Press); a report by the Center for Constitutional Rights submitted to Congress in December 1984; and the Witness for Peace booklet *What We Have Seen and Heard*).

The Core Group, which decided Nicaragua policy in Washington, was well aware of *contra* terrorism but ignored it. Among the hard-liners and ideologues who made up the group, according to one of them, "there was a kind of